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ABSTRACT

A study was conducted to gain a better understanding of problems facing limited resource families, specifically residents of four public housing communities. A needs assessment was developed and administered by a resident team from the housing communities. Through a systematic sampling technique, 100 households were selected from a target population of 500 households in 4 public housing communities in Cabell County, West Virginia. Sixty-three households responded. They reported that the most important problems affecting residents were as follows: unemployment, underemployment, drug abuse, crime, poverty, and family violence. Residents rated several programs to be most important in improving their quality of life. Four existing programs had the most importance in improving lives in housing communities: educational programs (General Educational Development programs), crime prevention, Wellness for Families, and recreational programs for youth. A recommendation based on these findings was to increase collaboration between educational institutions and social service organizations when planning programs and addressing issues concerning limited resource families. (Appendixes include a list of 11 references and 6 data tables.) (YLB)

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ANALYSIS OF PROBLEMS AFFECTING LIMITED RESOURCE FAMILIES IN SELECTED PUBLIC HOUSING COMMUNITIES

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ABSTRACT

ANALYSIS OF PROBLEMS AFFECTING LIMITED RESOURCE FAMILIES IN SELECTED PUBLIC HOUSING COMMUNITIES

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PURPOSE:

The study was conducted to gain a better understanding of problems facing limited resource families, specifically residents in four public housing communities.

METHOD:

A needs assessment was developed and administered by a resident team from the housing communities. Using a systematic sampling technique, 100 households were selected from a target population of 500 households in four public housing communities in Cabell County.

Sixty three households responded, reporting the most important problems affecting residents as: unemployment, underemployment, drug abuse, crime, poverty and family violence. The findings indicated that residents rated several programs to be most important in improving their quality of life. Existing programs that had the most importance in improving lives in housing communities are: educational programs (GED), crime prevention, Wellness for Families and recreational programs for youth.

Based on findings from this study, recommendations are to increase collaboration between educational institutions and social service organizations when planning programs and addressing issues concerning limited resource families.

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ANALYSIS OF PROBLEMS AFFECTING LIMITED RESOURCE FAMILIES IN SELECTED PUBLIC HOUSING COMMUNITIES

INTRODUCTION

Providing effective programs for limited resource families continues to be a challenge to educators and social agencies. As program efforts with at-risk audiences continue to expand, Extension Agents and community leaders must recognize the need for more fundamental information and have a better understanding of limited resource families (Slinski, 1991).

Because West Virginia University Extension faculty in Cabell County had collaborated with the housing authority to provide programs for public housing residents, we were aware of this need for more information, and because Cabell County experiences problems typical of limited resource families, the study was conducted there.

Cabell County has both a rural and urban population numbering 96,827 covering a land area of 282 square miles. Huntington, the county seat of Cabell County, is the second largest city in West Virginia. While Cabell County is not the most disadvantaged county in West Virginia, it does have problems that affect family well-being.

The average family in the county earned $28,090 yearly income in 1990. At the same time there were several changes in factors that influenced family well-being: (1) an increase in the percent of children living in poverty; (2) a 5.6 percent increase in families

living in poverty (15.4% to 21.0%); (3) an increase in the number of women with children under the age of 6 years in the labor force; and (4) a 19 percent increase in teen birthrate.

Although unemployment in Cabell County in 1990 was listed as only 6.6 percent, over three thousand children received Aid For Dependant Children (AFDC) benefits in 1990.

Of the 14,816 Cabell County Students, 60.4 percent are classed as needy. School drop out rate is 13.1 percent. After school care is practically non-existent in the county and care of younger children remains a problem for working parents or for parents who want to find work.

Cabell County has four public housing communities. All are located within the city limits. Approximately 500 units are occupied by limited resource families who fall within U. S. poverty guidelines. Public housing communities are managed by the Huntington Housing Authority.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The success of programs designed to help limited resource families achieve self sufficiency and independence can be better understood when problems are considered from the viewpoint of limited resource families themselves.

The primary purpose of this study was to gain a better understanding of problems facing limited resource families, specifically those residents in Huntington's four public housing communities.

This study attempts to answer the following questions:

(a) What is the socio-economic background of public housing residents?

(b) Do public housing residents feel that they have an influence on factors that affect their lives?

(c) Which of the currently existing programs do residents believe to be of most value?

(d) What are the most significant problems and barriers to service have residents encountered?

(e) Which future programs do residents feel could improve their quality of life?

RELATED LITERATURE

With the change in the composition of families in the United States in the past two decades, many of today's youth are found living in complex environments characterized by difficulties which place them at risk (Vail, 1992).

Nationwide, among families with children, 16.3 percent are headed by single women. The frequency of births to unwed mothers has increased from 10.7% to 24.5% which increases the need for child care and this becomes a major problem, especially for poor families (Vail, 1992).

Other serious problems face today's families and youth. Charles Tavares, in his presentation, "A View of America's Limited Resource Citizens" listed this compilation of staggering figures: (1) in 1990, the average poor family with children had a monthly

income of $450 less than the poverty threshold; (2) over two million children were reported either abused or neglected; (3) parents with children account for one-third of our homeless population; (4) 375,000 children are exposed annually to drugs; (5)thirty-five million adults are functionally illiterate; (6) two million youth leave school without marketable labor skills; (7) thirty-seven million citizens have no health insurance; and (8) the United States ranks 19th among world nations in infant deaths. (Tavares, 1992).

The problems of families as a whole must be addressed by social organizations and educators. Most educators now agree that working with youth and failing to address family dynamics is a failure to recognize the complexity of the situation (Vail, 1992).

Urban women - - clearly influenced by environment - - are hardest hit by unemployment, poverty, social isolation, sex discrimination and race discrimination. Their surroundings often provide little opportunity to learn skills which promote independence (Thurston, 1984).

Acknowledging that children too, are influenced first and foremost by family and secondly by environment (community, school, work and church), Bogenschneider (1991) suggests that in some communities where numerous risk factors exist, we may be able to develop more effective prevention programs if we understand those risk factors.

When developing programs, there are several factors to considered: (1) be sure that real problems facing youth and

families can be identified; (2) know what programs and resources are already in place in the community; (3) plan programs with well-defined outcomes; (4) coordinate with other organizations and programs to create a comprehensive effort; (5) involve local residents in the planning and implementation; (6) plan programs that are developmentally and culturally appropriate; and (7) become familiar with current research based information (Bogenschneider, 1991).

METHODOLOGY

A needs assessment was developed and administered in four Public Housing Communities.

A systematic sampling technique was used where 100 households were selected from a resident list of 500 with the intention of surveying every 5th household. Target population was the residentsof public housing communities.

Permission to survey residents was obtained from the Director of the Huntington Housing Authority. The content validity of the questionnaire was approved by a panel of experts representing the Housing Authority, two major universities and the Extension Service of West Virginia.

A husband-wife team was hired to administer the questionnaire as a field practicum for their social work program at one of the state's major universities. They were also public housing residents.

Information from every 5th household was not available due to problems of safety. Some apartments were off-limits, because they were under drug-use surveillance. As a result, information was collected from approximately every 7th household. Considering the difficulty involved, interviewers obtained a 12.6% sample of the population instead of the intended 20%. Since, the Housing Authority retained the right to conduct the survey, we were not able to resample.

FINDINGS

DISTRIBUTION OF SOCIO-ECONOMIC BACKGROUND OF PARTICIPANTS

Sixty-three households participated in the needs assessment. The participants were predominately white (55%). Thirty-eight percent were African-American. However, from Housing Authority records African Americans made up over 70 percent of the resident population.

Sixty-six percent of those interviewed had an education level of tenth grade to twelfth grade.

An average of 2.43 persons lived in each household with an average of 1.2 children. Children's average age living in participants' household was 5 years and 9 months. Fifty-four percent of household residents were between the ages of 19 - 34, with 26 percent being between the ages of 35 - 54, 10 percent between the ages of 55 - 64 and 10 percent aged 65 - 74.

(Insert Tables 1, 2 and 3 About Here.)

COMMUNITY RATING AS A PLACE TO LIVE

Of the residents responding to the survey question, "How would you rate this public housing community as a place to live?", eight percent rated their community as an excellent place to live; twenty-two percent rated their community as a good place to live; thirty-five rated their community as fair; twenty-two percent rated it as poor and fifteen percent did not respond.

RESIDENTS OPPORTUNITY TO AFFECT HOW THINGS HAPPEN IN THEIR COMMUNITY

Residents who responded to the survey question, "How much opportunity do you have to affect how things happen in your neighborhood?", felt they did not have much ability to affect. Of those responding to the survey, only seven percent felt they had much ability to affect. Twenty-five percent felt they had some ability to affect; twenty-seven percent felt they had little ability; thirty-four percent felt they had no ability and seven percent did not respond.

COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION AND PROGRAM EFFECTIVENESS

Residents responded to the question about participation in Housing Community programs. Adults are taking advantage of educational and job training programs at a high rate of participation. Thirty-eight percent of those responding were involved in GED classes or Occupational Industrial Careers (OIC) Job Training.

Other successful activities were summer camp, resident council, YMCA activities, Martial Arts and community dinners.

The five programs that residents listed as having improved their lives most were: GED, OIC, Wellness Program, recreational programs for youth and crime prevention programs.

(Insert Table 4 About Here.)

HOUSEHOLD PROBLEMS

Concerning the question on household problems, fifty percent of those surveyed felt that lack of affordable recreational activities was a problem. Stress was rated at 35 percent. Not being able to afford additional education, clothing and medical care (doctors and prescriptions) were also high on their list. After school care and child care were both important issues. Drug and alcohol abuse was listed as a major problem.

(Insert Table 5 About Here).

SECURITY AND DRUG PREVENTION

In response to the survey question, "Are you aware of the Housing Authority Hotline?", sixty-three percent of those who responded to the survey question were aware of the Drug Hot Line. Thirty-seven percent were unaware throughout all four public housing communities. One community was evenly divided between being aware and not knowing of its existence. In another community residents indicated that forty percent of them were unaware.

Forty-nine percent felt safe using the hot line. Nineteen percent were uncomfortable with its use. Reasons for those who were reluctant to use the drug hot line included being fearful that information would not be kept confidential, fear of retaliation, that response by police or housing authority staff would be slow, and some could not remember the number.

RESIDENT'S COMMENTS

"I have been a silent blockwatcher. I helped in reporting events that led to a bust last year. When there was fifty or more out on Doulton Avenue, I reported sometimes three times a night to direct line into top officers. I need to feel protected in name and address. When it comes to drugs, it's hard to trust anyone.

I believe in spite of our freedom being monitored, we need more security, like maybe a guard where people sign in and out. It's sad but life with crime has reduced our standard of living all around the globe. You can take a drivers license and open my doors. I can't even sleep at night because I feel insecure since I have lived here. I've been threatened twice just for looking out my window."

An Unknown Blockwatcher

"I would like to thank you for the programs you do have, like the Y.M.C.A., Boy and Girl Scouts, St. Johns House, Summer Camp, Camden Park, and the circus. You do offer to those who attend things for our children and adults. I do my part as a part of this

community - as getting along with all, young, old, black or white. Thanks for all you do."

An Unknown Participant

NEIGHBORHOOD PROBLEMS

Those responding to this section of the survey found unemployment to be the single largest problem in public housing. Forty-seven of the sixty-three residents surveyed stated unemployment was the major problem, giving unemployment a frequency percentage of seventy-five, drug abuse followed very closely at seventy-three, with forty-one of the sixty-three responses rating this a major issue.

Other issues that residents view as major problems in public housing communities include underemployment at fifty-seven percent,alcoholism at fifty-four percent, crime and poverty at fifty-two percent and family violence at forty-six percent.

(Insert Table 6 About Here)

Of those responding on the survey question pertaining to difficulty in receiving services, residents rated in order of importance: (1) Transportation; (2) Had to wait too long; (3) Services were too far away and (4) Ineligible for services.

IMPROVING QUALITY OF LIFE

Future programs that residents listed as most important for their families are educational and work programs (trade & nursing), drug awareness and drug prevention. Early afternoon or evening is the best time for programs.

What can be done to improve the quality of life? Only twenty-seven residents responded. Twelve listed more security and a drug free community as important. Nine residents listed paint, repairs and carpet.

CONCLUSIONS

The results of this study seemed to indicate that limited resource families have the same concerns and goals for their families as do families who have higher levels of income and more abundant opportunities. They want a safe environment for themselves and their children; education and job training; career and job opportunities and recreational opportunities for their children. They felt that they could do better if services were more easily accessible such as transportation and child care. However, most of them felt they had little ability to affect these things.

What kind of programs then should we plan that would be more effective in helping limited resource families improve their way of life?

Education is thought to be the best weapon against poverty and crime. Compare the circumstances of two sets of young parents: one set with high school diplomas and another set with no diploma. The question could be, "which family is more likely to live in poverty?" Research has shown that education will reduce the chances of living in poverty because of increased earning power and because of the fact that educated persons are more likely to feel in control of decision making in their lives (Hodgkinson, 1991).

Hodgkinson (1991) writes about the effect of education on crime. Eighty percent of America's one million prisoners are high school drop-outs.

Another statistic favoring the benefits of education is that early intervention pays off in the long run. For every one dollar spent on a Head Start child, taxpayers will save seven dollars in future services.

Thus one can conclude that educational opportunities for all ages would benefit family well-being.

Mentoring programs are believed to be another effective method of dealing with problems of families at-risk. Freedman, (1991), states that mentoring for economically disadvantaged youth help them stay "afloat amid a sea of stresses: single-parent homes; living in poor neighborhoods; impersonal schools and communities and lack of adult supervision." In a thirty year study done in Hawaii with disadvantaged youth, all the children who did well had at least one adult who provided consistent emotional support.

In West Virginia University Extension Service's Strong Mountaineer Mentoring Program for rural disadvantaged youth, a mentoring program was pilot tested in 1992, in two Wyoming County schools. Second grade students and high school students showed a significant increase in grades when compared to the previous grading period (Nestor, 1992).

So in working with inner city families and youth who are considered to be more at-risk, involving mentors would be important.

Cooperation between community organizations to create a multifaceted effort toward helping families is most effective.

Some of the best results have come when families, schools, local leaders, law enforcement and social agencies have cooperated to improve problem areas.

In an era when communities and schools are often impersonal, this combined personal interest strengthens family and community ties.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of this study, increased collaboration between educational institutions and social organizations is needed when addressing the needs of limited resource families.

An organization is now being developed in Cabell County, Family Resource Network (a coalition of local social agencies and institutions). The purpose of this coalition is to develop an effective comprehensive, integrated delivery system for services rendered to families built upon respect for the integrity of the family and belief in the abilities of each family to nurture, educate and support the development of its children.

Increasing provisions for affordable child care would allow parents to pursue educational or job training opportunities. As stated earlier, education may be the most important factor in solving unemployment and crime.

Developing afterschool care would enable more children and youth to be in a safer environment. Most afterschool programs have

a scheduled time for doing homework allowing students to be better prepared for each school day.

Residents indicated a need for recreational activities for adults and youth. A community center in each housing community would greatly enhance opportunities for sports, exercise and other types of recreation. Staying active can alleviate feelings of depression and hopelessness.

Family violence was found to be a problem. Family counseling should be made available to families to allow them to learn: acceptable safe methods of handling stress and conflict; parenting techniques and family management.

Since public housing residents reportedly felt that they had no impact on their community happenings, empowerment opportunities could be planned. For example, a Family Community Leadership Program, West Virginia University, is available to citizens. From this curriculum community residents learn how to identify needs, analyze options and formulate solutions to their problems. They learn how to communicate with local, state and national leaders to influence legislation. These skills of leadership could be carried into other areas of their lives.

Organizations need to keep abreast and learn to influence legislative action that affects families, such as Public Law 102-367 (enacted September 7, 1992). This action amends the Job Training Partnership Act to improve delivery of service to hard-to-serve youth and adults (long-term unemployed and school drop-outs). A new program provides educational and training services to

disadvantaged youth. Incentives are being paid to states to provide training for parents with absent spouses and who have children receiving AFDC. Benefits should reduce welfare costs and promote self-sufficiency (Family Economic Review, 1993).

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TABLE 1.

DISTRIBUTION OF SOCIO-ECONOMIC BACKGROUND OF PARTICIPANTS

COMMUNITY	AVERAGE # IN HOUSEHOLD	PARTICIPANT'S AGE GROUP	# OF CHILDREN	AVERAGE AGE OF CHILDREN
Community 1	2.5	19-34 = 21 35-54 = 7 55-64 = 3 65-74 = 2	42	4.7
Community 2	2.25	19-34 = 2 65-74 = 2	3	6.3
Community 3	2.5	19-34 = 6 35-54 = 8 55-64 = 3 65-74 = 1	20	7.5
Community 4	2.5	19-35 = 5 35-54 = 2	12	5.25
Not Reported	1	55-64 = 0 65-74 = 1		
Total	2.43	19-34 = 34 35-54 = 17 55-64 = 6 65-74 = 6	77	5.9 avg age

TABLE 2.

RACE AND ETHNICITY

RACE	FREQUENCY	%
WHITE	35	55
BLACK	24	38
SPANISH/HISPANIC	0	0
AMERICAN INDIAN	1	1.75
ASIAN/PACIFIC ISLANDER	0	0
OTHER (BROWN)	1	1.75
NO RESPONSE	2	3.5
TOTAL	63	100

TABLE 3.

EDUCATIONAL LEVEL OF HEAD OF HOUSEHOLD

YEARS OF SCHOOLING	FREQUENCY	%
1 - 6	2	3
7 - 9	11	18
10 - 12	41	66
13 - 16	8	12.5
16 +	0	0
NO RESPONSE	1	.5
TOTAL	63	100

TABLE 4.

PARTICIPATION IN HOUSING COMMUNITY PROGRAMS

PROGRAM	FREQUENCY	%
GED CLASSES	13	21
BLOCKWATCH	8	13
LINK	6	9
SUMMER CAMP	10	15
BASKETBALL	9	14
BOY SCOUTS	2	3
BOYS CLUB	5	8
SPECIAL ACTIVITIES (YOUTH OR ADULT)	4	6
OIC JOB TRAINING PROGRAM	11	17
WELLNESS/WEIGHT CLINICS	4	6
COMMUNITY DINNERS, ETC.	7	11
CHILDREN OF PROMISE	0	0
ST. JOHN'S HOUSE	5	8
BIG BROTHERS/SISTERS	4	6
B.A.B.E.S. PROGRAM	1	1
RESIDENT COUNCIL	11	17
PARENTING	0	0
TENNIS	2	3
YOUTH COUNCIL	2	3
GIRL SCOUTS	1	1
YMCA	7	11
MARTIAL ARTS	7	11
RESIDENT COUNCIL ACTIVITIES	6	9

TABLE 5.

THE 10 MOST IMPORTANT HOUSEHOLD PROBLEMS AMONG PARTICIPANTS

PROBLEMS	NONE		SMALL		MEDIUM		LARGE	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
NOT BEING ABLE TO AFFORD RECREATIONAL ACTIVITIES.	16	25	6	10	5	8	31	50
NOT HAVING ENOUGH MONEY TO BUY NEEDED CLOTHING AND SHOES.	12	19	14	22	5	8	26	41
HAVING A LOT OF ANXIETY, STRESS OR DEPRESSION.	10	16	11	17	11	17	22	35
EXPERIENCING ALCOHOL AND/OR DRUG PROBLEMS.	12	19	8	13	14	22	22	35
NOT BEING ABLE TO AFFORD ADDITIONAL EDUCATION.	20	32	7	11	10	16	19	30
NOT HAVING ENOUGH MONEY TO PAY THE DOCTOR OR BUY PRESCRIPTION MEDICATION.	23	37	10	16	5	8	19	30
NOT BEING ABLE TO PAY FOR OR GET MEDICAL INSURANCE.	28	44	6	10	6	10	17	27
NOT BEING ABLE TO AFFORD LEGAL HELP.	28	44	7	11	5	8	17	27
NOT BEING ABLE TO OBTAIN ACTIVITIES FOR TEENS.	22	35	7	11	9	14	16	25
DELINQUENCY EDUCATION FOR LAW ENFORCEMENT PERSONNEL.	25	40	7	11	6	10	16	25

TABLE 6.

COMMON NEIGHBORHOOD PROBLEMS AMONG PARTICIPANTS

PROBLEM	NO PROB. N	NO PROB. %	SMALL PROB. N	SMALL PROB. %	MEDIUM PROB. N	MEDIUM PROB. %	LARGE PROB. N	LARGE PROB. %	NO RESP. %
WATER, AIR, NOISE OR OTHER POLLUTION.	13	21	20	32	11	17	11	17	1
INADEQUATE PUBLIC TRANSPORTATION.	34	54	14	22	6	10	2	3	1
UNEMPLOYMENT.	4	6	2	3	3	5	47	75	1
UNDEREMPLOYMENT.	5	8	2	3	10	16	46	57	1
ALCOHOLISM.	5	8	7	11	13	21	34	54	
DRUG ABUSE.	3	5	5	8	3	5	41	73	
CRIME.	8	13	12	19	33	52			
TEENAGE PREGNANCY	6	10	8	13	16	25	26	41	1
LACK OF AFFORDABLE LEGAL SERVICES.	15	24	11	17	11	17	19	30	1
FAMILY VIOLENCE, ABUSE OF CHILDREN OR ADULTS.	9	14	9	14	10	16	29	46	1
ILLITERACY.	9	14	14	22	13	20	20	32	1
POVERTY.	4	6	8	13	10	16	33	52	1
SHORTAGE OF CHILD DAY CARE.	7	11	13	21	18	29	13	21	1
MENTAL ILLNESS O EMOTIONAL PROBLEMS.	7	11	16	25	17	27	16	25	1
SHORTAGE OF RECREATIONAL FACILITIES OR PROGRAMS.	10	16	12	19	12	19	21	33	1
SHORTAGE OF AFFORDABLE HOUSING.	21	33	7	11	15	24	11	17	1
SUBSTANDARD HOUSING.	24	38	7	11	14	22	12	19	1

TABLE 6. - CONTINUED

COMMON NEIGHBORHOOD PROBLEMS AMONG PARTICIPANTS

OVERCROWDED HOUSING.	17	27	7	11	13	21	18	29	1
LACK OF AFFORDABLE MEDICAL CARE.	15	24	15	24	9	14	15	24	1
RACIAL OR ETHNIC DISCRIMINATION.	11	17	14	22	16	25	12	19	1
SEX EDUCATION.	13	21	13	21	9	14	13	21	2
ABUSE OR NEGLECT OF THE ELDERLY.	10	16	9	14	19	30	14	22	1
SEXUAL ABUSE OR ASSAULT OF CHILDREN.	12	19	12	19	9	14	20	32	1
SEXUAL ABUSE OR ASSAULT OF ADULTS.	15	24	13	21	11	17	18	29	
LACK OF EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES.	14	22	10	16	14	22	16	25	5
LACK OF TEEN PROGRAMS.	9	14	10	16	16	25	19	30	5
DELINQUENCY EDUCATION FOR LAW ENFORCEMENT PERSONNEL.	12	19	10	16	14	22	16	25	8